Networking South Korea:

Internet, nation, and new subjects

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Abstract

Korea is one of a few jurisdictions which set up the Internet domestically in the early days of Internet development and has since continued to be a breeding ground for global Internet trends. In this article, I challenge attempts to construct a coherent narrative of Korea's Internet prowess by looking at the locatable sources from which different subject positions emerged. My analysis focuses on the ways that coherent national histories emerged with mediatized subjects. I first analyze nationalist popular discourse, focusing on the media discourses of becoming an information-based society through a process of 'informatization' (*chǒngbohwa*) from a leading national newspaper. Second, I examine a counter-subject that emerged through online communities. The phenomenon of the 'Internet freak' (*int'ōnet p'yein*) drew attention to Koreans who had been called on to become Internet users, but who had failed to comply with the circulated image of the successful Internet user. I argue that the reflexivity of Internet freaks as ambivalent subjects enables us to intervene in attempts to project Korean Internet development in terms of a coherent narrative emphasizing national prosperity and rose-tinted promises of the information society.

Keywords

Informatization, neoliberalism, subjectivity, Internet freaks, loser aesthetics, South Korea

Introduction

South Korea (hereafter Korea), despite its status as a latterly industrialized country, is one of a few jurisdictions which established the Internet domestically in the early days of Internet development. Since launching its first Internet connection in 1982, Korea has been at the forefront of a number of Internet trends, such as Internet user cultures, social networking services, and online gaming enabled by the escalating prevalence of broadband Internet and high number of users (Chon et al, 2013). There have been efforts to write a kind of ‘standard’ history on the development of the Korean Internet (The Cyber Internet History Museum; Chon et al, 2013), based on certain quantitative achievements and historical milestones, that implicitly celebrate the impressive dimensions of the Korean Internet footprint. However, there have also been more critical efforts to address aspects of the Korean Internet development outside of the standard celebrationalist narratives, for example, ones focusing on the diverse social actors involved in its development (Cho, 2007), examining the domestic circumstances as well as transnational contexts of Korea’s IT industry (Jin, 2010), and elaborating on the role of ICTs in overcoming the capitalist crisis since the 1970s in the context of a transition from Fordism to post-Fordism (Kang, 1996).

Much of the scholarship, then, on the Korean Internet, whether implicitly teleological or overtly critical, relies on narratives or cases of (developmental) progression. This paper, extending critical engagement around the Korean Internet

phenomenon, discusses the subjective dimensions through which the Korean Internet was propagated and by which it was critiqued by Internet users. That is, this analytical approach treats ‘historical facts’ about Korean Internet development as themselves constitutive of the coherent narrative of developmental success. Implicit within these facts are active attempts and the ambition to make Korea an Internet power (*int’ōnet kangguk k’oria*) which have contributed to the public discourse on guiding the Internet in a certain direction. Seeing the Internet as the future of the nation supported the governmental decision to invest, which enabled the speedy construction of a technological infrastructure that in return became tangible evidence for the claim that Korea had become an Internet powerhouse. Coexisting with narratives of technological progress, active efforts were also effectively developing new subjects of this unfolding history who could successfully populate the narrative of success. In this article, I emphasize the importance of understanding the roles that subjects *in* history come to see themselves as subjects *of* history, both in propagating pro-state efforts to establish the Internet as a ‘powerhouse’ and in critiquing it.

The article and my argument will proceed in two parts. In the first half, I analyze the way in which the discourse about informatization and the Internet mediated a neoliberal transformation by promoting ICTs as tools for survival in the context of intense and ongoing global competition crucial for the competitiveness of both the Korean nation and individual Koreans. I analyze one of the leaders of the campaign of

informatization in the 1990s, led by the *Chosun Ilbo*, known in Korea as the most popular conservative daily newspaper (Endnote 1). I pay attention to the way in which the newspaper used stories of real people in pushing forward its narrative. The narrations of these people amount to attempts to create and mobilize a new social type that delivers an ideology of informatization in an intimate and concrete way. In the second half of the article, I examine the way in which Korean Internet users reacted to this nationalist popular discourse on informatization and the Internet. I undertake an analysis of technologically mediated social behavior on the part of people who call themselves ‘Internet freaks’, gathering on a forum website called DCInside.com. As users steeped in Internet technology, these freaks demonstrate both the enthusiasm for technology asked for as good subjects of a thoroughly ‘wired’ society, but also the ambivalence for a neoliberal social order in which they are constantly in danger of being relegated to ‘loser-dom’. The reflexivity of Internet freaks questions the promises of informatization and complicates the attempt to create coherent narratives about the development of the Internet in Korea.

Informatization (Endnote 2) for the national future: the 21st century informatization forum of the Chosun Ilbo

Today, the 21st century informatization forum of the *Chosun Ilbo* declares the beginning of the ‘Movement for Informatization’. If we do not open our eyes and do not choose (informatization), we may repeat the darkness and stagnation of the past in the coming

century. One hundred years ago, we were defeated by huge warships and bombs and were colonized. It was the result of our laziness that others hurried up with their industrialization. Although it is late, we could reach the border of globalization through speedy enlightenment, independence, industrialization, and democratic movements. However, we face a mysterious area where the common sense of yesterday becomes uncommon today, and the reality of today becomes the illusion of tomorrow. To investigate an ocean, running with the huge waves of the information revolution, is globalization. While we have followed other countries up to this point, we cannot move forward any further unless we find the right direction and make a road for ourselves. To cross the rough ocean of globalization, the most needed mind-set and tool is informatization.... (*Chosun Ilbo*, 1995)

National yearning to join the ranks of advanced nations has played an important role in bringing about a strong drive toward the rapid development of the Internet, much as it did in leading the agenda for the rapid economic growth of Korea that began in the 1960s. As of the 1990s, the development of the Internet became a new goal to achieve in order to advance national development (Jin, 2010: 20; Kang, 1996: 236–237). When the Internet emerged in certain advanced capitalist countries, including the United States, as a key piece of infrastructure for the future in the early 1990s, Korea was more than ready to join the leading group of countries pushing the technology forward because of its engineers, who had developed the Internet domestically. The Kim Young-Sam regime (1993–1998) actively took up this position, most particularly as a leader in Asia through construction of the Asia Pacific Information Infrastructure (APII) to be implemented in collaboration with the Global Information Infrastructure (GII). In 1995, the rapid development of broadband services was started through the first Master Plan

for setting up a comprehensive strategy for the Korean Information Infrastructure (KII, *ch'ogosok chōbo t'ongsin kiban kuch'uk chonghap ch'ujin kyehoek*) which aimed to 'construct an advanced nationwide information infrastructure' (Jin, 2010: 20). These events were indicators of the advanced status that Korea had attained in the area of ICTs, resonating with the Kim Young-Sam regime's chief policy regarding globalization.

It was also at this time that the *Chosun Ilbo* started their promotional campaign for globalization through the Internet, a campaign with the slogan 'Although our industrialization was late, let's start informatization in advance' (*Sanōhwa nŭn twijyōt chiman chōngbohwa nŭn apsō kaja*). The paper announced this slogan and the campaign on March 5, 1995, presenting it as a movement for the commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the newspaper itself. The catchphrase succinctly expressed the core sentiment of Korean modernization that has circulated throughout the 20th century—a sense of being 'behind the times' with a pressing need for rapid progress in order to catch up. In this case the slogan was adapted and directed toward the area of information technology and became a popular catchphrase nationwide. As its nationalistic, even poetic, manifesto above shows, informatization carries condensed meanings as an extension of industrialization, as a solution to grapple with globalization, and as an 'inevitable' path toward the predetermined future of a high-tech information society. In such a discourse, the Internet is presented as an

impending national temporal moment, not something that the Korean nation or Koreans as individuals could choose to go with or against, but something that one can only be behind or ahead of.

At around this time the newspaper sponsored a campaign called *KidNet* (*k'idūnet*), which aimed to help elementary schools open their own school home pages and to network with other schools under the slogan 'Internet for Kids' (Rye, 2014). For this purpose, the *Chosun Ilbo* raised funds and networked volunteers in elementary schools that wanted to participate in the *KidNet* movement, as well as university students that wanted to help elementary schools gain access to the Internet and to have their own home pages. Because this movement concerned children, there were many moving stories which the *Chosun Ilbo* willingly featured on its pages. The vivid stories of real people which the newspaper regularly reported fleshed out the abstract ideal of 'informatization for the national future' and gave it a human face. The following are some examples of the stories that the paper ran:

'Wow! I found Michael Jordan on the web! What are you searching for?' Kids who speak a Gyeongsang-do dialect are excited and curious about what their friends are doing. It has been one month since the Internet was connected in Nambumin Elementary School (Nambumin Ch'odūng Hakkyo). Whenever the Internet class is finished, kids beg for the class to be extended. The Internet was connected to Nambumin Elementary School with the help of an anonymous student's parent who is working in a fish market (*Chagalch'i sijang*), who donated 10,000,000 won (US\$10,000) to do so. Eighty-five percent of the students at Nambumin are from poor families who do not have their own houses, personal computers, or an Internet connection. Nevertheless, Nambumin has been able to establish an educational environment thanks to the parents of students who are very much interested in the education of their children. (Kwōn, 1996a)

Kim Samt'ae (a fourth year university student of Inje University) was busy setting up the Internet for Nambumin Elementary School....He believes that, in the future, people who have information will rule the world....Samt'ae says, 'Although this might seem very modest, connecting five Pentium PCs to the Internet, it has to do with kids' dreams and their future. If possible, I would like to further develop the Internet system of Nambumin, mobilizing all of my knowledge'. (Kwōn, 1996b)

These stories drew the outlines of the new social types who were to be found in the information society. The newspaper combined real figures and familiar modernist tropes with stories centering around the new technologies, such as kids from a poor neighborhood who are eager to learn and can be anything they want if appropriate support is provided (ICTs providing a means to transcend, in the above story); a passionate young man who, bearing clear insight into the coming age of the information society, wants to help others to have access to the power of information; devoted parents who will do the right things for their kids (i.e. make sure their kids are trained in the use of ICTs) even though they are poor. These are social types that resonate with the ordinary Korean people as well. Through its campaign, the *Chosun Ilbo* positioned the entire nation to care about the Internet and promoted that all people should be familiar with and use the technology.

Korean Internet freaks as ambivalent subjects towards informatization

The Asian financial crisis, which hit the country midway through 1997, became a crucial motivating context to push harder toward the rapid development of the Internet. While the crisis of the Fordist mode of production had been deepening in Korea since the early 1980s (Seo, 2009: 57–58), the financial crisis became the pinnacle event that precipitated most Koreans beginning to feel neoliberalization in their everyday lives. The Internet as a high-tech medium was called on to resolve the economic crisis, in collaboration with other resolutions such as downsizing, financial mergers, and deregulating employment for the purposes of a more flexible labor market.

This process of transformation has also led to the emergence of Internet user-types such as netizens and bloggers, skillful in using advanced technologies. These user-types exemplify desirable neoliberal subjects who are conscientious and self-sufficient, citizens of a new kind depoliticized space. To analyze subjectivities of Korean Internet users, I build on both Marxist and Foucauldian scholars' work on neoliberalism. As Song (2009: 12) illuminates, the Foucauldian study of governmentality is useful in unpacking 'technologies of (neo)liberal governing' and the formation of 'governable subjects'; on the other hand, the Marxist study of the capitalist state can offer better tools to explain 'the consequences of (neo)liberal governing in the capitalist labor market'. Anthropologists have also contributed to scholarly efforts to tease out the

social transformation brought about by neoliberalism in terms of a ‘structural force that affects people’s lives and life-chances’ as well as an ‘ideology of governance that shapes subjectivities’ (Ganti, 2014: 90). While Korean Internet users try to become desirable neoliberal subjects, people have experienced a constant anxiety that they are not competitive enough, with the imagined consequences consisting of, for example, exclusion from normative life paths entering university, finding a stable job, having a family, and reaching and maintaining at least middle-class status (Hahm, 2012: 534–535). One of the areas that this anxiety has manifested itself has been through the public posts that Internet users create, in the act of doing so they present themselves as another emergent ‘type’—the Internet freak (int’ōnet p’yein).

The Internet freaks that I focus on gather on a website called DCinside.com and produce/post/comment on their own products, which include texts, photos, cartoons, composed images, and audio and video clips. DCinside has been one the most popular anonymous Internet forum as well as one of the most popular portal services in Korea. It began as a small-scale online shopping mall specializing in digital camera equipment in the 1990s. The ability to create and share images online quickly led people to upload posts that had nothing at all to do with digital cameras. The unruliness of the multifarious posts uploaded to DCinside soon led to its reputation as an online space where ‘anything goes’.

The label ‘Internet freak’ connotes Internet users who use the Internet excessively every day and are heavily attached to the practice of being connected to the Internet. The posts by Internet freaks on DCinside became popular because of the style and wit they employ in delineating the poor and unpromising lives of Koreans. They have also created and promoted various images of social losers, freaks, and surplus population in styles that they call ‘DCinside-like feeling’ (*tissi ppil*) or ‘full of idiotic tastes’ (*pyŏng mat*). In the following, I analyze a series of posts with photos of DCinside users (Endnote 3) through which the label of Internet freak emerged to articulate the way in which Internet users reflect on the social type of Internet users created and promoted by popular discourse. I suggest possible meanings implied by this series of posts by contrasting them with a series of TV advertisements which Internet freaks originally parodied. The advertisements and the series of posts parodying them tell us different stories about what advanced ICTs can bring into people’s lives. They show a discrepancy between the idealized pictures of a high-tech lifestyle and parodied counter discourses which delineate mundane scenes of ICT usage.

The first post of the series shows an anonymous user who has uploaded a photo of himself using the Internet. The small portable coffee table holding a bowl of cooked rice and several humble side dishes is located in front of his desk. He is holding a mouse in his left hand and his spoon in his right hand. He is reading something from a DCinside.com bulletin board. The caption of this photo says, ‘You, who cannot leave

the Internet for one minute, you are a freak (p'yein)'. The caption parodies an advertisement for the services of a major Korean telecommunication company, KTF (Yurek'a, 2001). This advertisement shows Woo-sung Jung, a Korean actor who is famous for being good-looking, tall, fit, and fashionable, dressed in a formal shirt and necktie. He talks on his mobile phone while dancing in a fancy, crowded club. A narrator speaks over the scene, saying, 'You, who cannot leave your mobile phone for one minute because of your career, because of your love of every single minute, you, you're number 1'.

This advertisement, targeting men between the ages of 25 to 35 years old (Welk'omyunik'eisyönjü, 2002), actually uses an English-derived term, 'the main' to describe Jung, which I have translated as 'number 1'. The phrase is dense with meaning, including the more obvious, self-oriented 'You are the protagonist of your life'. Yet it also has implications in terms of this normative male's place in Korean society: 'You are the foundation of Korea', it implies, and 'You are the center (core member) of this society'. The advertisement delivers an image of living a successful life by combining several images such as a trendy and crowded club scene, a successful young businessman in a formal suit, and the latest model of mobile phone. While the original text of the advertisement focuses on showing the busy, passionate, and successful life of one man who is at the center and is the driving force of both his life and of society, the

parodied photo at DCinside shows the bleak scenery of everyday living as mediated by new ICTs.

The scenes shown in the series of posts at DCinside make other users seeing these posts, including myself, laugh. The scenes call attention to the banal realities of typical everyday lives, which look much different from the KTF ad. When one person disclosed his personal experience of being obsessed with the Internet as a parody of the KTF advertisement, many people showed an enthusiastic response by posting their own parodies in similar situations. Some photos show a person eating alone in his place while using the Internet. Others show a person who is sleeping, face oriented to the still-on computer monitor that accompanies him in his bed, his hand still cupping his mouse. If we look at the photos of the series carefully, especially the monitors, we can see that people appearing in the parodied photos are all connected. Each person in those photos is looking at one of those in the previous photos. The collective actions fueled by the new ICTs changed the bleak scenes of everyday life into collective fun-making based on common ground. When the Internet users started to call themselves ‘Internet freaks’, they began to enjoy making fun of themselves as well as each other and ‘being pathetic’ (*tchijilham*) became fun. Self-mockery combined with a critique of the idealized images of ICTs became a methodology to convert the bleak aspects of life into noteworthy ones.

The series of photos posted by the Internet freaks belie the promises of capitalist market/government-led subjectivities and of new technologies by making fun of Internet freaks themselves, who are far from achieving the desirable lifestyle portrayed by Woo-sung Jung in the KTF advertisement. These Internet freaks are also quite unlike the kids of Nambumin elementary school or Samt'ae Kim introduced by the *Chosun Ilbo* in 1995, who are more humble, but no less enthusiastic or ambitious than Woo-sung Jung. The new ICTs are promoted in the KTF ad (amid many other locations) as a crucial qualification for competitiveness in the future. Many Koreans have rushed to acquire up-to-date versions of these devices, despite the fact they in no way guarantee success for their users, at least in terms of material prosperity. The original advertisement and its successful protagonist (Jung, Mr. 'Number 1') become questionable when they are reflected in the mirror of the Internet freak (p'yein). The self-mockery of the Internet freak also challenges the healthy images of new Internet users such as the children from Nambumin elementary school and Samt'ae Kim. They exemplify this by showing the 'after' effects of informatization. They accomplish this by showing themselves temporally post-purchase and post-reading of Internet propaganda, making references back to the ads and slogans that other users are familiar with. In this way, the Internet freak is not just 'another' critical type but one that works in dialectic symmetry with the positive Internet types.

Internet freak culture demonstrates the ways in which Korean Internet users have questioned, contested, and negotiated, as well as been subjugated to, neoliberalization through the style, subject matter, and self-representation of their products. Despite their hard work and efforts, most Koreans come to be disenfranchised and disillusioned because severe social competition allows only the very best to succeed. Instead of existing as silent subalterns, users of DCinside have shaped themselves into very talkative ‘powerful’ ‘losers’ because of the technological power in their hands. The grotesque figures of the characters, the deliberately shoddy styles of the posts, and the humorous sentiment that delineate the ‘pathetic’ aspects of ordinary life together compose a culture that I have dubbed ‘loser aesthetics’ (Yang, 2015). Their stories tell us about the minute details in their endeavor to become a desirable neoliberal subject—such as a skillful Internet user. Their stories also tell us about their struggles and hostility toward conforming to gain the qualification of being a desirable subject. Their self-mocking humor and satire have arisen from the irony of this ambivalence. DCinside users are ambivalent subjects who try to become desirable and successful neoliberal subjects but who, at the same time, are aware of their subordinated status in which they can easily become a failure and fall into the position of social loser. The culture of ‘anything goes’ at DCinside enables its users to speak out in a way that belies the consequences of neoliberalization. The reflexivity of Internet freaks as ambivalent subjects enables us to see a less successful facet otherwise ignored in the attempts to

project Korean Internet development according to coherent narratives emphasizing national prosperity and the untested, rose-tinted promises of the information society.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined the rapid development of the Internet in Korea by focusing on the interplay between technology, nation, and subject. To challenge attempts to write a ‘standard history’ of the Internet, I have intervened in the seemingly coherent narrative of the nationalist popular discourse on ICTs and informatization by analyzing the 21st Century Informatization Forum of the *Chosun Ilbo* and the phenomenon of Internet freaks at DCinside. While government policy and media journalism have played an important role in promoting the need for informatization and defining its meanings, online user communities and cultures have complicated the meanings of new technologies through technologically mediated cultural engagements. Individual Internet users have been mobilized by the nationalist call for informatization, but have also willingly participated in realizing the visions of informatization at the level of everyday life. The phenomenon of Internet freaks intervenes in the dominant discourse on ICTs and informatization through their posts telling us stories that are quite different from the promises of the dominant discourse. The interplay among government policy, media journalism, and Internet user communities reveals the complicated process of ongoing discourse formation. The Internet boom in Korea under amplified

neoliberalism after the Asian financial crisis is the process within which a new social imaginary on the economy was formed to legitimate a new political rationale related to contemporary economic changes. The implications in talking about this relationship itself are significant because such a relation would be acknowledged as common elsewhere, for example, as the ‘dot-com bubble’ at the end of the 1990s and into the early 2000s affected both North America and Korea, showing how flows of speculation funds targeted the newly emerging IT industry. My case study can contribute to understanding the connection between the Internet and neoliberalism in late industrialized countries like Korea. Through ambivalent subjects such as the Internet freak, this article aimed to delineate the complexities of Korean Internet development by challenging the attempts to produce a coherent narrative.

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Notes

1. Despite different tones and political stances, major Korean newspapers have dealt with informatization from similar perspectives, which does not mean that their articles

are the same but that they have comparable fundamental assumptions about the information society: Informatization as an extension of industrialization; Informatization as something necessary and inevitable due to globalization; Informatization as the predetermined future for a high-tech information society. This article focuses on the *Chosun Ilbo*'s 1995 campaign and its leading role in such journalistic discourse on informatization, especially in consideration of its catch phrase 'Although our industrialization was late, let's start informatization in advance'.

2. The concept 'informatization' (chǒngbohwa) originates in Daniel Bell's classic work on theories of postindustrialism and informationalism which Bell suggests would be information-led and service-oriented (Bell, 1976). Morris-Suzuki's work examining Japanese informatization uses the concept 'informisation' as equivalent to 'computerization' and 'automization' of industry (Morris-Suzuki, 1988). My usage of 'informatization' more broadly focuses on networking through Internet technology. While early scholars, such as Bell and Morris-Suzuki, examined this term before the Internet prevailed and conceptualized it based on the computer technologies and automation of industrial and office machines, scholars, such as Castells, who study this concept in the more recent social contexts in which the Internet became popular embed it more in the networking technologies (Castells, 2000). While Korea had started its informatization project by joining the flow of computerization and automation in industry, informatization came about in earnest through the dispersion of the Internet.

3. The original links to the posts are not working at the moment, which is not uncommon on DCinside, but have been reposted on other websites. Refer to the following link to see the series of parody photos.

<http://blog.naver.com/PostView.nhn?blogId=index0709&logNo=130013153243>

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